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ABSTRACT

A survey was conducted in 1985 by the College Board to determine the educational status of blacks in the United States. The conclusion was that even though legal barriers to educational opportunities have been removed, education to a large extent remains separate and unequal in the United States. Desegregation resulted in a system that, for the most part, allowed interaction among students from the various racial groups. The low success rate of black children has left the black community asking the question, "Why?" Carter G. Woodson as early as 1933 made the argument that black people were being "miseducated"--they were confusing their own interests with those of the dominant society. In this paper an educational system is proposed that would be functional for both the black and nonblack child, a system that is multiculturally sensitive, one that recognizes the positive contribution of African-American family, and further, a system that maximizes the contribution of parents in the educational process. (BZ)

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THE EDUCATION OR MISEDUCATION OF MINORITY CHILDREN

Eloise J. McKitric

In response to the reports "Actions for Excellence" and "A Nation at Risk," the College Board conducted a study to determine the educational status of black Americans. This report was an . . . assessment of the educational status of black Americans in an attempt to fill the gap between reforms rhetoric and reality; between politics and the students they will effect . . . the report also included important social and economic data.

The findings indicate that there were both positive and negative aspects of our educational system. The following are but a few of the findings:

- Educational performance of black students in elementary and secondary schools, as measured by standardized achievement test scores, rose in many areas over the decade of the 1970's, but remained lower than that of non-blacks by 1980.

- There was a gain in mathematical and reading test scores particularly for young blacks from urban, disadvantaged communities and southeastern states.

- Performance was better in mathematical knowledge (factual recall) than in mathematical skills (performing computations and manipulations).

- Black students were disproportionately more likely to be enrolled in special education programs and less likely to be enrolled in programs for the gifted and talented than were white students.

- At high school level, blacks were underrepresented in academic programs and overrepresented in vocational education programs. These vocational programs offered few English, mathematics, and science courses.

- Black students were enrolled in vocational education programs earlier and received extensive training for low status occupations. Typically the placements were made by school personnel rather than student or parent selection.

- Students in low income and predominantly minority schools had less access to microcomputers and when they had access it was usually for drill and practice rather than programming or concept development (College Board, 1985).

The conclusion was that even though legal barriers to educational opportunities have been removed, education - to a large extent - remains separate and unequal in the United States. Minority students are placed disproportionately in vocational courses or in low-track classes that are not intellectually challenging. Further, these children are often placed in classrooms with educators who lack enthusiasm, have low student expectations, and respond to students in

a way that communicates to the students they cannot succeed (College Board, 1985).

The purpose of this paper is first to explore some of the arguments that have been made as to why black students have not been successful in the American educational system. Second, to briefly review some of the alternative educational options that have been selected by black students and their parents to improve educational success. Third, to propose a system that could result in improved academic success within the students' cultural context.

Until 1954, the United States had a "separate but equal" educational system for black children. This was a system where all children were guaranteed an equal education, as long as there was no interaction among black, white or brown children. However, during the Brown vs. Board of Education deliberations, it was clearly documented that though the system was indeed separate, it was by no means equal to the educational arena provided for white children. The existent system was deemed as being harmful to the participants and prohibited maximum educational achievement for all students.

Desegregation resulted in a system, for the most part, that allowed the interaction among black, white, and brown students. In addition, there were educators that represented each of the different sectors. However, the results were not as positive as the black society had hoped. The low success rate of black children has left the black community asking the question, why?

Why are black students losing ground as they proceed through the education arena? When ethnic minority students are tested in primary grades, they have scores on standardized tests approximately

equivalent to the scores of the majority students. However, by the time the minority students reach the upper elementary grades, they have exhibited progressive reading deficiencies as compared to the majority students (Garcia, 1978).

One common explanation given by sociologists and urbanologists for the lack of performance of black children has been to discuss the weaknesses of black families. This explanation is based on the assumption that black families are "matriarchal" and unstable. That the black family does not prepare black people for productive lines. Further, this family type is the primary source of black economic weaknesses (Hill, 1971).

One of the major flaws in this argument is that the black family, up until the child enters the educational arena has prepared the child the function effectively as reported by the child's performance on standardized tests. It would appear that something happens to the student, once he/she enters the system, that deters learning.

Other sociologists have shifted the explanation for the low success rate of black children to the inability of educators to teach black children. They have suggested that the attitudes and beliefs held by the educators act as inhibitors to the student's success (Clark, 1983). These educators are believed to be operating from a cultural ethnocentric world view.

Educators operating from this perspective define knowledge what students should know and how they should behave from a perspective that is based on their culture as the standard for comparison. Educators with this world view make evaluations based on their own limited cultural experiences and backgrounds. This in and of itself

is thought to be fine. However, the problem arises when the educator is not aware of these biases. Therefore, these internalized presuppositions are displayed through the expectations or lack or expectations the educator has for his/her students (Clark, 1983; Dobson, 1981).

From this perspective, students are viewed as coming from homes that are pathological and disfunctional. Further, these persons are believed to operate from the perspective that all aspects of African culture that could account for cultural differences were destroyed during slavery. That slavery marked the beginning of the black child's culture and the major goal of the child was to become acculturated into the Euro-American way of life. In addition, the nonsuccess in achieving the Euro-American way of life can be explained by deficiencies in the black child and his/her family.

Dissatisfaction with the educational system has resulted in the black community exploring the works of Carter G. Woodson. Very early he made the argument that black people were being "miseducated." They were confusing their interests with those of dominant society (Woodson, 1933). With Woodson's argument as the foundation, two predominant philosophies were pursued by the black community to deal with the existing problem. One approach was to push for a system that recognized the African heritage of the black family. The second called for an alternative educational system.

Arguments were made by some persons in the black community to continue operating in the current structure but teach educators that the African-American heritage was a uniquely different phenomenon as compared to the Euro-American heritage. That this African-American

culture although different, was viable (Valentine, 1969; Young, 1974). The black community wanted educators who operated from a cultural relative perspective (Willie, 1981).

The black community wanted educators who focused on the strengths of the black family. They wanted recognition of those traits which facilitated the ability of the family to meet the needs of its members and demands made upon it systems external to the family. Those traits that were necessary for the survival and maintenance of effective family networks (Hill, 1971).

It was the belief of one part of the black community, that the dominant class was not able or willing to adopt this world view. The only way the positive aspects of the black family could be presented was via an alternative educational system.

This alternative educational system would serve two functions. First, it would infuse the black child with competencies necessary for survival as well as creative expression. Second, it would change the way the black child was perceived and treated in the educational process (Hale, 1982). This system would be broadly based on a multicultural educational model.

The idea was with increased research in regards to the African-American culture a separate educational system could be created that was sensitive to the needs of the black child. This alternative system would function from a cultural relative perspective. That is, focusing on the black family's similarities to the African culture patterns and those of African descent living in the United States.

It is the writer's thesis and others (Hill, 1971; Billingsley, 1974) that multicultural education, while it has its merits, has a missing element. These models fail to recognize the roles that families play in the lives of children. While nonsuccess is often attributed to the failure of the black parents to assist their children in the educational arena, no mention has been made as to why this does not occur.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the high frequency rate of matriarchal or female-headed households, has been used as the explanation for the nonsuccessful black child. However, in a study by Clark (1983), it was shown that children with the greatest academic success were those living in homes with supportive parents. Whether the home was single or two-parent was not the issue, but parental involvement was the key factor.

The author proposes an educational system that would be functional for both the black and nonblack child, a system that is multiculturally sensitive, one that recognized the positive contribution of the African-American family. Further, a system that included parents in the educational process. One that did not have parents only functioning in the traditional arena of parent-teacher conference, PTO involvement, and bringing snacks to school. A school system that would not only assess the needs of the students, but attempt to determine what parents needed to interface positively with the educational system. This calls for a system that truly recognizes the impact that parents have on their children and that parents are intelligent beings who could possibly assist the school in their endeavor to educate. This would be a system that would call for parental involvement before curricular changes were made not after.

New programs, longer school days and years, and changes in the standards is not the solution. What is needed is a system that is sensitive to cultural differences. A system that maximizes the positive contribution of parents. A system that recognizes its limits in educating the child.

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